



# Better Safe



WELCOA'S ONLINE BULLETIN FOR YOUR FAMILY'S SAFETY

## Dealing With TRAUMA

### FRIGHTENING EVENTS CAN HAVE LASTING EFFECTS

Imagine seeing a fellow soldier killed by a roadside bomb. Or searching through the rubble of the World Trade Center for survivors. Or being sexually assaulted. You're probably even trying to push those images out of your head as you read this. Some people find it impossible to stop thinking about traumatic experiences. They may have recurring nightmares. Fear and anxiety could begin to interfere with every aspect of life.

It was called Soldier's Heart in the Civil War. Since then, it's gone by such names as Shell Shock, Battle Fatigue and Post-Vietnam Syndrome. Now we call it post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD. And we know that it affects people other than those who've been to war.

Anyone who's been through an experience that involved physical harm or the threat

of it can develop PTSD. Causes include mugging, rape, torture, child abuse, car accidents and natural disasters.

#### Symptoms Of PTSD

After a trauma, you may startle easily and be constantly on guard. You might become emotionally numb or lose interest in things you used to enjoy. You may have trouble feeling affectionate. You could become irritable, aggressive or even violent. It's common to avoid situations that remind you of the incident and to have trouble sleeping.

These normal responses to horrific events usually become better over time. Most people don't forget what has happened to them, but they can eventually put the incident in the back of their minds. They carry on with their day-to-day lives and don't go on to develop PTSD.

For some people, however, the symptoms don't fade away. Their anxieties become so overwhelming that they are no longer able to focus on their daily lives.

"Not all traumatic responses are PTSD," says Dr. Meena Vythilingam of the Mood and Anxiety Disorders Program at NIH's National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). "It becomes PTSD in a small subgroup, when these symptoms persist over a month, cause extreme distress or interfere with the ability to function at work, school or home."

#### The Effects Of PTSD

People with PTSD can't stop thinking about the traumatic experience during the day and have nightmares about it when they sleep. Some people actually relive the event by vividly re-experiencing the sounds,

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smells or feelings of the original trauma. These are called flashbacks.

Memories, thoughts, feelings or even flashbacks of a trauma can be triggered by ordinary things, such as a door slamming or a car backfiring on the street. To avoid being reminded of the trauma, people with PTSD might refuse to talk about it and stop going places that remind them of it.

PTSD is considered a chronic anxiety disorder. It affects both men and women. Men are more likely to be exposed to traumatic events, and about 5-6% of them develop PTSD. Women are more likely to develop PTSD after being exposed to a traumatic event, however, with 8-14% developing PTSD. The chance of developing PTSD is highest after sexual trauma.

"PTSD is a brain disorder. It is not caused by a moral weakness or a character flaw," Vythilingam explains. "There are well-documented changes in the function and structure of the brain regions mediating fear and memory in PTSD."

If you don't get treatment, PTSD can persist for years. In fact, it never fades for about 30% of those who aren't treated. PTSD goes hand in hand with depression. People with PTSD also often abuse drugs and alcohol.

## Treating PTSD

Vythilingam says that there is no one treatment for PTSD. Studies have found that both medications and psychotherapy (talk therapy), during which a therapist helps you to face your fears, can be effective.

New strategies for developing better PTSD treatments will come from a better understanding of the chemical and structural changes in the brain that are associated with PTSD.

The important thing to remember about PTSD is that if you suspect you or someone you know has it, don't hesitate to seek help. Vythilingam says, "You should not feel you should have to walk alone after a traumatic event."

## Getting Help

If you need help dealing with PTSD or another mental illness and don't know where to turn, talk to someone you trust who has experience in mental health. Ask their advice on where to seek treatment. Here are the types of people and places that will make a referral or provide diagnostic and treatment services:

- Family doctors
- Mental health specialists, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers or mental health counselors
- Religious leaders/counselors
- Health maintenance organizations
- Community mental health centers
- Hospital psychiatry departments and outpatient clinics
- University or medical school-affiliated programs
- State hospital outpatient clinics
- Social service agencies
- Private clinics and facilities
- Employee assistance programs
- Local medical and/or psychiatric societies

In times of crisis, the emergency room may be able to provide temporary help for a mental health problem, and will be able to tell you where and how to get further help.

